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ABSTRACT

Documented effects of relaxed school disciplinary standards show the need for implementation of strict, consistent disciplinary measures. Poor school discipline endangers students and staff, contributes to teacher burnout, hinders student education, costs taxpayers, and encourages criminality both in and out of school. Students rights advocates and court decisions have protected the rights of disruptive students, failing to consider the rights of other children to learn in a disciplined, structured place. The result has been a loss of teacher authority and the inability of schools to respond to criminal activity with an appropriate degree of punishment--thus erasing distinctions between good and poor behavior. Stepped up security measures are not the answer. Studies have found that the best, virtually cost-free method of responding to the problem is a clear, systemwide commitment to constructive and firm treatment of discipline problems and a strong, dedicated principal who serves as a role model for both students and teachers. Such was the case in the transformation of George Washington Preparatory High School, in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California, from one of the worst schools in the Los Angeles area, in 1979, to a school with a safe environment where students eagerly accept the opportunity to concentrate on academic achievement, in 1984. Although the Reagan administration has undertaken a school discipline initiative, state and local jurisdictions must accept their responsibility to restore discipline to the public schools. (DCS)

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# Discipline in the Classroom

*Roger Clegg*

"One of the best things we have going for us in education is that kids have a low tolerance for ambiguity. They want to know who's in charge. They want to know what's expected and the consequences. And they want to know that what's right and wrong today will be right and wrong tomorrow. . . ."

—James C. Enochs, Assistant Superintendent
Modesto City Schools, California[1]

"All behavior [in many public schools] is regarded as tolerable unless it is specifically declared illegal," according to an article in the fall 1982 issue of *The Public Interest*.[2] This statement would be closer to the truth if it did not rest on a qualification. In too many public schools, *all* behavior is tolerated whether it is legal or not.

The article, appropriately entitled "Children's Rights and Adult Confusions," goes on to describe the experience of a teacher who was subjected to verbal assaults and sexually degrading comments from a group of students in the hall. When asked why she did not report the students, the teacher replied that it would have been pointless. She knew that reporting the incident would only illustrate her vulnerability to such abuse since the students would probably

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not be punished. Punishment required something she lacked—witnesses.

Over the past 20 years or so, the roles of administrators, teachers and students in many public schools have become blurred. Once, schools exercised their authority to quash unacceptable behavior. Today, students walk all over those allegedly in charge. The teacher in the above example endured the students' degradation because she lacked the authority to stop them. She may have sensed the futility of trying to take action, or maybe even the danger. But at least her assaults were only verbal; thousands of teachers are not that lucky.

Teachers are not alone in suffering the consequences of relaxed disciplinary standards. Poor discipline is taking a heavy toll on every aspect of public education. Teachers and administrators pay by risking their personal safety. Taxpayers pay by footing the bill for vandalism and the countless other costs related to school crime. But the highest price is exacted from those who can least afford to be shortchanged. Students pay, and may continue to pay all their lives, by failing to get the quality education to which they are entitled.

The most compelling reason to improve discipline in public schools is that disorder presents an obstacle to the educational process. When discipline breaks down in a school, chaos ensues, distracting everyone—even those students who would prefer to concentrate on learning.

Concern over relaxed school discipline and its consequences is widespread. The 1982 "Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" found that "lack of discipline" is the biggest problem facing public schools. Respondents believed that discipline problems, more than low salaries, account for teachers leaving the profession.[3] Concern over poor discipline was greater than concern over "lack of proper financial support," while "difficulty getting good teachers" ranked fifth among the public's school-related worries. Even drug use was of less concern to poll respondents than discipline in 1982—even though marijuana use by youths aged 12 to 17 had nearly

doubled in proportion since 1972, and even though one in 16 students was smoking marijuana daily.[4] Fully 70 percent of those polled viewed a lack of discipline as a very or fairly serious problem in the public schools.

Yet some schools will not suspend unruly students for brief periods without granting them a formal hearing complete with the right of appeal.[5] Often in such schools, the principal will find it easier to ignore intolerable behavior than to cut through the red tape shielding the student from punishment. The American Federation of Teachers policy statement attributes discipline problems to "faulty public school policies framed by students' rights advocates who have been so preoccupied with protecting the difficult child that they have failed to consider the rights of the average child to learn in a disciplined, structured place." In other words, students' rights advocates are protecting the wrong students' rights.

The courts bear much of the responsibility for undermining the authority of schools and relaxing disciplinary standards by handing down decisions which are broadly applied in school systems across the country. One such ruling, *Wood v. Strickland*, delivered by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1975, determined that school officials can be held personally liable if they knew or "reasonably should have known" that the disciplinary action they took would violate the constitutional rights of a student.[6] In *Goss v. Lopez*, another 1975 Supreme Court ruling, the Court decided that students are entitled to constitutional "due process" protection from being suspended or expelled arbitrarily.[7] These and similar rulings have led to excessive caution on the part of school officials in responding to unruly, sometimes criminal behavior. For example, in some school districts, the formal hearings instituted as a result of court rulings are conducted by authorities outside the school. Whoever is attempting to discipline a student through a hearing is required to gather evidence and produce witnesses in support of the case. Consequently, some principals tend to play down student misbehavior, or even ignore it, rather than confront the difficulties inherent in attempt-

ing to suspend or expel a student who deserves to be expelled.

Concerted efforts to protect the rights of disruptive students have gradually eroded the authority of teachers. It has become increasingly apparent that many teachers lack the support of the school and the courts to maintain order in their classrooms. This weakened authority is perhaps the most significant forerunner of school crime. According to a poll conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in 1981, over 60 percent of those teachers who had been attacked by students felt that school principals failed to take appropriate action. When a school does not respond to criminal activity with an appropriate degree of punishment, it erases all the usual distinctions between poor behavior and good behavior. Unless there are distinct, predictable consequences to one and rewards for the other, students are unable to learn a set standard of behavior on which to base their actions. Instead they learn that they can get away with almost anything.

Such a freewheeling attitude can only make a bad situation grow worse. A 1983 NEA poll revealed that since 1977 physical assaults on teachers had increased 53 percent, an increase that may be partially due to another finding of the 1983 poll: 43 percent of the students who had attacked teachers received a "slap on the wrist" or no punishment at all. If an attack on a teacher can go unpunished, then it would seem that any student conduct is permissible.

The National Institute of Education (NIE), an agency of what is now the U.S. Department of Education, published an extensive report to Congress in 1978 on disorder in public schools. NIE found that "the more firmly a school is run, the lower the incidence of violence."[8] As is apparent from the statistics in the study, many of the nation's schools were not run firmly enough. Approximately 6,700 of them had a crime problem at the time the study was conducted.[9] The NIE survey has never been duplicated in scope, but additional research on school crime and disorder indicates that lack of discipline still poses a threat to the public schools. In November 1983, the Boston Commission on

Safe Public Schools issued a report entitled, "Making Our Schools Safe for Learning," suggesting that the situation had probably worsened since 1978, when NIE published its findings.[10] Jackson Toby, Director of Rutgers University's Institute for Criminological Research concluded in a major 1983 study that the incidence of school violence was probably understated in the NIE data.[11]

Other experts allege that school crime is no worse today than NIE found it to be in 1978; but neither do they contend that it has gotten better—and that in itself is frightening.[12] During a typical month in 1976, when NIE gathered most of its data, as many as 42,000 acts of vandalism were committed against 24,000 public schools at an average cost per incident of $81.[13] Almost $2 million worth of property was stolen monthly from 10,000 schools in 13,000 separate thefts.[14] On the average, 2,000 fires were set, 1,100 bomb threats or actual bombings occurred,[15] 125,000 teachers were threatened with harm,[16] and public secondary school students were subjected to 525,000 attacks, shakedowns and robberies—all in a month's time.[17]

Obviously, there is considerable room for improvement. In any event, the issue should not be whether the problem is getting better or growing worse. Rather, any amount of violence or vandalism, any number of students or teachers who are afraid to attend school, any level of theft or destruction of school property is entirely unacceptable.

NIE found school crime so prevalent that certain crimes were more likely to be committed on school property than elsewhere. The school burglary rate was about five times that of commercial operations such as stores, which otherwise had the highest burglary rate reported in the National Crime Survey. Eight thousand public schools, one out of every ten, were burglarized each month.[18] The susceptibility of students to attack was greater in school than anywhere, except unusually high crime areas. Though 12- to 15-year-olds typically spent about 25 percent of their active time in school, 50 percent of all assaults and 68 percent of all robberies committed against them occurred there.[19]

Perhaps the reason behind the disturbing number of

certain school crimes is that the offenders know they are unlikely to be punished for their misdeeds. Most offenses were committed by current students. Most offenders in assault cases were known to their victims by name.[20] Yet 83 percent of the attacks involving weapon use and attacks resulting in injury were not reported to the police. Of fights between students, 85 percent of those involving weapon use and 93 percent of those resulting in injury also went unreported.[21] In addition to being spared any involvement with the police, students who committed crimes were highly unlikely to get caught in the first place. Student reports to NIE indicated that of the more than half-million attacks, shakedowns and robberies which occurred in an average month, only 24,000 were reflected in principals' records.[22]

The Boston Commission on Safe Public Schools, in its 1983 study, agreed that student misconduct is underreported. The survey directors compared official statistics to student and teacher reports, concluding that "the results of this survey clearly suggest that official rates are sorely deficient for a comprehensive understanding of crime and violence in our schools."[23] The study indicated that the carrying of weapons during the 1982-83 school year was clearly "on the rise" and a bigger problem than official records had earlier indicated. Two hundred eighteen dangerous weapons were confiscated from students—27 percent more than had been collected the year before,[24] but far less than the number students admitted to carrying: 37 percent of the male and 17 percent of the female high school students said they had carried weapons in school at some point during the year.[25]

Such activity drains a school's power to perform the one function to which it should be wholly dedicated: the education of its students. For years, experts have been trying to improve the quality of public education. The most popular cure-all proposal has been money: the more of it education gets, the argument runs, the better education will be. But higher salaries for teachers and more elaborate equipment

in an atmosphere that is conducive to neither. In a January 1984 memorandum to the President's Cabinet Council on Human Resources, the CCHR's Working Group on School Violence and Discipline suggested that no salary increase can improve educational quality "if the teachers who receive them are too afraid, or distracted, to teach. And improved buildings, materials, or curricula will avail nothing if students are too afraid, or distracted, to learn."

Student and teacher fear is a logical consequence of the poor discipline and ensuing crime in public schools. According to the NIE study, 5,200 teachers were physically attacked in a month, 1,000 of whom were injured seriously enough to require medical attention.[26] Not surprisingly, 12 percent of all teachers said they hesitated to confront misbehaving students because they were afraid.[27] Fifty percent of the teachers who responded by mail to the Boston Commission had been victims of robbery, vandalism, assault or theft during the previous school year.[28] Of those teachers, over half were victimized in the presumed safety of their classrooms—the only place, ironically, where the students seemed to feel safe. The Boston students said they felt unsafe almost everywhere else in their schools—restrooms, stairways, school grounds, school buses and bus stops.[29] The NIE study found that 22 percent of all secondary school students avoided restrooms, considering them "unsafe."[30]

The unsettling atmosphere of a poorly disciplined school causes negative effects even off campus, in the relative safety of the outside world. Teachers and students who are subjected to such an atmosphere are being cheated. Many teachers, for example, suffer a grim consequence of their profession known as "teacher burnout." When the International Labor Organization studied schools in the United States and two other countries in 1981, it found that one in four teachers "suffered from severe stress that is 'significantly' affecting their health. This stress is mainly due to pupil violence."[31] The CCHR Working Group cited a Chicago study of teacher burnout victims, describing them as

"physically alive but professionally dead, . . . going through the motions of teaching, marking time until either retirement or a better job offer came along." If these teachers are unable to teach, then what and from whom are their students learning?

The worst that undisciplined schools can do to students, in terms of shaping their futures, may not be allowing their academic failure, but encouraging their criminal success. In a paper delivered to the American Society of Criminology, Jackson Toby stated that frequently committed school crimes "lose their ability to arouse indignation."[32] It is this growing casual attitude toward crime, according to Toby, that can turn a student into a criminal. A school's failure to discipline amounts to an official sanction of criminal activity, and as both the NIE and NEA studies indicated, school officials too often fail to administer adequate punishment. Suspension and expulsion, for instance, have become difficult to implement, even in response to criminal acts. Toby believes that the inability of school officials to protect their students by removing from their midst those who are violent, "reinforces criminal tendencies in youngsters who learn that they can 'get away' with offenses at school more easily than in the environing community." Toby also noted, however, that "the main significance of school crime may be that what is rehearsed in school may be practiced outside of school" later in life.

Toby's argument is simple. Crime breeds more crime, both in school and in society. The longer it takes to put discipline back in the public schools, the longer school crime will thrive, and the more damage will be done to education and to students.

So far, officials have typically responded to school crime by trying to police it. Burglar alarms are installed, security guards are posted, and teachers spend valuable time monitoring their classrooms, all in the interest of protecting the school and everyone inside from disruptive students. The taxpayers may think their taxes are spent on education, but in reality they are paying for stepped-up security measures. The National PTA has observed that the annual cost of

school vandalism, something in the vicinity of $600 million, exceeds the nation's total expenditure on textbooks.[33] When you add to that figure the inestimable cost of lost teacher time, the increasing price of school security systems, and the countless other costs related to school crime, the total expense is staggering. Simply strengthening school security is a costly and, based on current statistics, a debatable method of reducing school crime.

On the other hand, the implementation of strict, consistent disciplinary practices has proven to be an effective and virtually cost-free method of responding to the problem. The Boston Commission study agreed that most school crime can be attributed to "a lack of clear systemwide commitment to constructive and firm treatment of discipline problems."[34] And the NIE study discovered that "the single most important difference between safe schools and violent schools was found to be a strong, dedicated principal who served as a role model for both students and teachers, and who instituted a firm, fair and consistent system of discipline."[35]

The transformation of George Washington Preparatory High School, in the Watts section of Los Angeles, is proof of the difference such a principal can make. Five years ago, George Washington Preparatory High School was noted as one of the worst schools in the Los Angeles area. *Time* magazine later described it as "most people's Hollywood image of the blackboard jungle."[36] It had a serious drug problem, a preponderance of gangs and violence, an absentee rate of 28 percent, and one of the lowest academic ratings in the entire county. In essence, the students were given the freedom to do as they pleased—and the result was chaos.

Today, George Washington High bears little resemblance to the school it once was. Now it is a school with a safe environment where students eagerly accept the opportunity to concentrate on academic achievement. Unlike the 800 students who were bused away in 1979, largely because they wanted the type of education the school could not offer, virtually no one wants to leave today. In fact, the

school currently has a list of over 200 students waiting to enroll. Absenteeism has been reduced by 80 percent. In the 1982 school year, suspensions fell nearly 40 percent and crime was down 59 percent. Though five years ago less than half of the senior class even thought about going to college, 80 percent of the graduating seniors actually did so in 1983. According to the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*, "achievement has leaped as misbehavior has plunged." George Washington "boasts the L.A. school district's biggest increase in the number of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the inner city's lowest percentage of students barred from extracurricular activities by poor grades."[37]

The stimulus behind Washington High's dramatic transformation is George McKenna, the type of principal described in NIE's prescription for safe schools, and a man President Reagan has described as "a hero with faith in . . . common sense values."[38] When McKenna came to Washington High in 1979, he moved quickly to restore order. He implemented a strict code of discipline which required the signatures of both students and parents. Students were no longer permitted to smoke, loiter, gamble, fight, or carry radios or drugs on school grounds. One of the rules of conduct states that "defiance of the authority of school personnel either by behavior, verbal abuse or gestures is not permitted." McKenna also instituted a dress code, attendance rules, and daily homework requirements. In signing the "parent/student contract," students "agree to abide by" the "rules, policies and regulations of the school," and parents "undertake to become personally involved" in their children's education.

Washington High did not need more money for higher salaries or more elaborate equipment in order to become a model school. It needed discipline, and discipline has made all the difference.

Gallup polls have indicated for the past ten years that the public wants discipline restored to the schools. This wish has been expressed most urgently by minorities. A greater proportion of minorities believe poor discipline is a serious

threat to public education, and justifiably so.[39] Minority students are more likely to be victimized by school crime, more likely to have their learning disrupted, and thus, less likely to receive a good education.

Minorities have a special interest in improving school discipline. Almost three-fourths of all minority families have children in school; in 1981, 71 percent of black and 75 percent of Hispanic households had school age children, compared to only 52 percent of white households.[40] Even more significant, disorderly schools are effectively robbing minorities of the equal education for which they fought a long, hard battle. Minority students are more likely to attend urban schools where discipline problems have allowed disorder to interrupt learning. Students in predominantly minority schools are seriously attacked and robbed more than twice as often as students attending predominantly white schools.[41] In minority schools, teachers run six times the risk of being attacked.[42]

Some civil rights advocates have argued that disciplinary practices are discriminatory. The Commission on Civil Rights during the Carter Administration noted that "differences in culture, lifestyle, and experiences in a white-dominated society" make it unfair to punish minority students for "institutionally inappropriate behavior."[43]

This is exactly wrong. The *failure* to discipline creates an obstacle to learning, especially in minority schools. To allow poor discipline to continue its negative effects is anti-minority. Depriving children of a chance for education is depriving them of their future. Teaching them that criminal behavior is acceptable further diminishes their chances for advancement.

The importance of discipline to education influences the decision of many parents to enroll their children in private schools. According to the Secretary of Education's report to Congress on the financing of private elementary and secondary education, 87.1 percent of the parents surveyed considered discipline a very important factor in choosing their children's private schools.[44] But not everyone can afford to finance their children's education. Parents need not be

required to pay private school tuition in order to afford their children the superior education a well-disciplined school can provide. As George McKenna of Washington High has demonstrated, turbulent public schools can be turned around. Order can be restored by establishing a structured environment where students know what is expected of them and where they know the consequences of their actions if they misbehave. This requires the fair and consistent enforcement of rules that are understood and known by the students.

In response to these problems, this Administration has undertaken a school discipline initiative. It consists of Presidential leadership drawing national attention to the problems of school discipline and violence, with supporting actions by the Departments of Education and Justice. President Reagan has met with educators and state and local government officials and has directed the Departments of Education and Justice to support their efforts to restore an orderly, effective learning environment to public schools—but without interfering with management and policy discretion on the state and local level. The federal role has been designed to complement and defend the efforts of principals, teachers, parents and students in establishing a basis for achievement in their schools, rather than to create another series of costly and cumbersome programs.

President Reagan has, for instance, requested the Department of Justice to file "friend of the court" briefs when appropriate in cases involving school discipline. The Department's efforts in such cases are geared toward protecting the authority of teachers, principals and school administrators in responding to school discipline problems.

As another example, the Departments of Education and Justice have coordinated their efforts to establish a National School Safety Center, which functions chiefly in the collection and dissemination of data. The Center gathers and analyses information on school safety and crime prevention techniques and legal information regarding school discipline. The Center will also develop a computerized na-

tional clearinghouse for school safety resources, and publish materials advising principals, teachers and parents of their legal rights in dealing with disruptive students, and of successful approaches to discipline problems. The Center will also recognize outstanding school safety leaders across the country.

The Department of Education will focus its attention on the prevention of school violence by evaluating activities currently underway in local school districts, and identifying how local jurisdictions can effectively reduce school crime. In addition, the Department will examine the crime and discipline records of individual schools when selecting the award recipients in the Secretary's Exemplary Elementary and Secondary School Competition. The Department is also prepared to sponsor regional hearings on school discipline in an attempt to seek possible solutions to discipline problems and to highlight local success stories.

The federal government, then, will do what it can to make sure that state and local officials have the tools—the information and authority—they need to design the best disciplinary standards they can and then implement them. But federalism dictates that the ultimate success of this effort depends on whether state and local jurisdictions accept their responsibility to restore discipline to the public schools. This will require resolution and commitment, not money.

For many—most—the realization of the American dream hinges in large part on receiving a good education in a safe and orderly environment. As President Reagan has said:

> We must teach our sons and daughters a proper respect for academic standards, for codes of civilized behavior and for knowledge itself, not for the sake of those standards, not for the sake of those codes, not even for the sake of that knowledge, but for the sake of those young human beings.[45]

**Notes**

1. James C. Enochs, "A Modest Proposal To Restore Educational Standards," *Education Week*, December 21, 1981, p. 18.

2. Gerald Grant, "Children's Rights and Adult Confusions," *The Public Interest*, Fall, 1982, p. 92.
3. *Phi Delta Kappan*, "The 14th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 1982.
4. "The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse," National Institute on Drug Abuse, in *Parade* magazine, March 4, 1984.
5. Jackson Toby, "Crime in School and Crime in the Community: Is There a Causal Connection?" presented at a meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 12, 1983.
6. *Wood v. Strickland*, 420 U.S. 308, 322, (1975).
7. *Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975).
8. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Institute of Education, *Violent Schools—Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to Congress*, Volume I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 8.
9. Ibid., p. 38.
10. Boston Safe Schools Commission, *Making Our Schools Safer for Learning: The Report of the Boston Commission on Safe Public Schools*, November, 1983.
11. Jackson Toby, "Violence in School," *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, Volume 4, University of Chicago Press, 1983.
12. For instance, a follow-up paper written in 1983 by Oliver C. Moles of NIE concluded that the most recent figures "contradict the notion of a progressive worsening of the school crime problem" since the 1978 study. [Oliver C. Moles, "Trends in Interpersonal Crimes in Schools" (based on a paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, April, 1983), September 12, 1983.] Moles conceded a slight increase in the number of assaults on students and teachers but contended that, overall, crime against individuals is not getting any worse. But even if Moles is correct in his analysis of figures which he admits are "very conservative estimates," he and his analysis do not indicate that there has been any improvement either.
13. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE), p. 50.
14. Ibid., p. 50.
15. Ibid., p. 50.
16. Ibid., p. 75.
17. Ibid., p. 47.
18. Ibid., p. 48.
19. Ibid., p. 32.
20. Ibid., p. 98.
21. Ibid., p. 45.
22. Ibid., p. 47.
23. Boston Safe Schools Commission, p. 16.
24. Ibid., p. 29.
25. Ibid., p. 13.

26. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE), p. 64.
27. Ibid., p. 75.
28. Boston Safe Schools Commission, p. 12
29. Ibid., p. 13.
30. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE), p. 64.
31. *Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 1981.
32. Jackson Toby, November 12, 1983 speech.
33. James McPartland and Edward McDill, editors, "Positions of Education Organizations," in *Violence in Schools*, (Lexington Books: Lexington, Mass., 1977), p. 104.
34. Boston Safe Schools Commission, p. 14.
35. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE), p. iv.
36. *Time*, April 25, 1983.
37. Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*, editorial, "The News Isn't All Bad: One School's Success Story," October 27, 1983.
38. Ronald Reagan, speech delivered at the 68th Annual Convention of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Las Vegas, Nevada, February 7, 1984.
39. Working Group on School Violence and Discipline, memorandum to the Cabinet Council on Human Resources, January 1984.
40. CCHR Working Group, January 1984.
41. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE), p. 110.
42. Ibid., p. 111.
43. CCHR Working Group, January 1984.
44. Ibid.
45. Ronald Reagan, February 7, 1984.